

UXPin

How to Launch Your UX Career And Get Paid

UXPin

How to Launch Your UX Career And Get Paid

Copyright © 2015 by UXPin Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication text may be uploaded or posted online without the prior written permission of the publisher.

For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed
“Attention: Permissions Request,” to hello@uxpin.com.

Authors



Guiseppe Getto is a college professor based in North Carolina who does freelance writing, UX consulting, digital marketing, and custom WordPress websites. He consults with a broad range of organizations who want to develop better customer experiences, better writing, better content, better SEO, better designs, and better reach for their target audience. He has taught at the college level for 10+ years. During that time, he has also consulted and formed service-learning partnerships with many non-profits and businesses, from technical writing firms to homeless shelters to startups. Visit him online at: guiseppegetto.com.



Jerry Cao is a content strategist at UX-Pin where he gets to put his overly active imagination to paper every day. In a past life, he developed content strategies for clients at Brafton and worked in traditional advertising at DDB San Francisco. In his spare time he enjoys playing electric guitar, watching foreign horror films, and expanding his knowledge of random facts. [Follow him on Twitter](#).

How to Launch Your UX Career And Get Paid

One of the least written-about topics by UXers is what it is like to be a UX professional, in a very practical sense: managing the day-to-day of projects, working with clients, collaborating with other kinds of professionals, etc.

Since UX is an emerging field, it makes sense that most thought leaders are trying to help people understand current UX trends, introduce them to UX methods, and generally help define UX for those unfamiliar with it.



Photo credit: [Barrel](#)

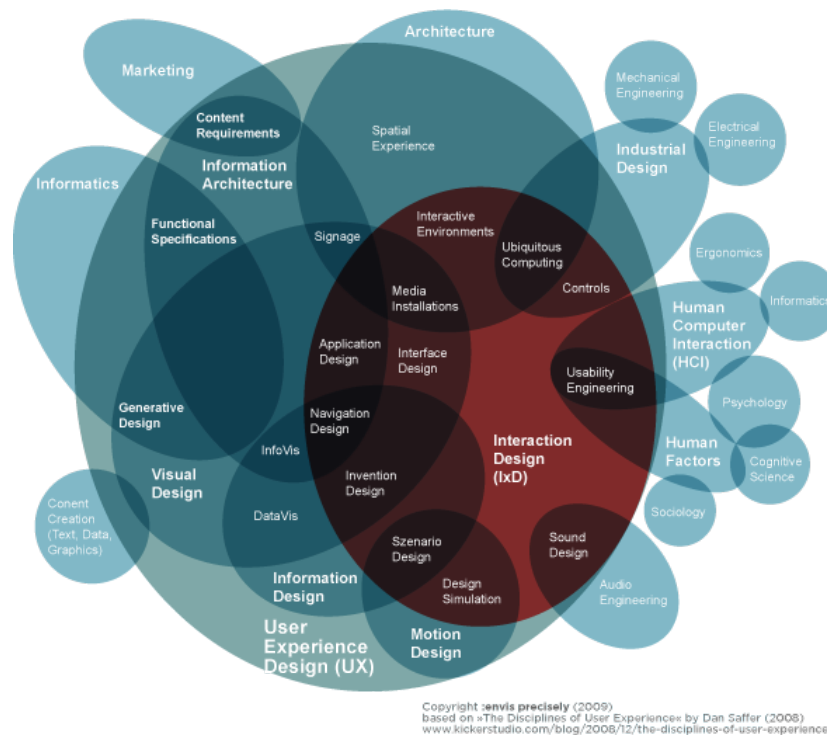
At the same time, it can be hard to imagine what life is like as a UX professional. There are plenty of textbooks about being an accountant, doctor, lawyer, or even a carpenter. However, there are no textbooks that I know of that tell people what their life will be like as a UX designer.

In this piece, I explain exactly that: what it's like to be a UX professional, based on my own experiences over the last 4 years, including conversations and interviews with scores of other UX professionals.

Let's get professionalizing.

1. UX is 50% Intuition and 50% Science

It's easy for people unfamiliar with UX to mistake that the discipline is 100% science, especially since it grew out of older fields, such as information architecture, cognitive psychology, and usability. My background is in the humanities – English, Technical Communication, I was even once a professional poet – but I never came at UX with that bias.



Source: ["Interaction Design Disciplines"](#), Wikipedia. [Creative Commons 2.0](#)

UX is a social science, at the most. A way of looking at the world that involves making decisions beyond data with humans firmly in mind. Whenever you leave behind the realm

of data and focus on other human beings, your job becomes necessarily more complicated and messy. And it can be fun.

Focusing on users is the most basic principle in both technical communication and user experience. In both fields, you understand and represent the needs of the audience of your work. The tools and methods are different, but the goals are similar.

Susan Tacker, User Experience Manager for Teradata

Users are troublemakers. They use digital products in unintended ways. They don't update their operating systems in a timely manner, which causes products to behave bizarrely. They ignore the best-laid, most obvious plans and instead adopt their own. Users are, in other words, human beings. And human beings are masters of messing things up – and this is where the fun begins for us as UXers

So, the first thing I ask people interested in UX is: are you good with people?

If they wrinkle their nose or shake their head, that's a huge red flag for me. It's the same question I ask people who say they want to be a teacher. Both are human-centric professions. In UX, you have to constantly consider users' needs,

just as in education you have to be mindful of the students' needs.. If dealing with messy, mundane human problems bother you, then UX isn't the discipline for you.

No design is perfect. You draw up all your mockups, you implement, and then you take some time and go back to see what's working and what's not, and think about what's missing that could make this a better product. Until your design gets put into action there's no way you can think of every little thing that might go wrong.

Timothy Rotolo, UX Architect for TryMyUI

At the same time, you may also struggle with UX if you like simple, black-and-white answers to problems. There are few certainties in UX, except that problems will probably have multiple solutions and will almost never be permanently solved.

Just when you think you've perfected a design, you'll start testing it and quickly realize you need one more iteration before it's even ready to be implemented. Or, you'll design a prototype that performs really well in testing, only to discover that your developer needs to go in a different direction due to technological or budgetary constraints.

Finally, I also like to warn people that when you join an emerging discipline, there are also complications that come along with that.

Don't fear controversy – For example, when we went about re-designing Yelp as an exercise, we knew that some people would probably disagree with our design decisions. But we went through with it anyway because we thought it was valuable to show how usability testing can help you improve design. Don't be afraid to push the envelope, just do it smartly (e.g. don't say "X sucks" just to make waves).

Jerry Cao, UX Content Strategist at UXPin

Be prepared to define and redefine what you do on a regular basis, even when you get your first real UX job. You will have to sometimes fight for resources for user testing. You will sometimes have to explain to your manager, in painstaking detail, why you can't rush a product to market without at least a few iterations of it. And your parents will probably never understand what you do, no matter how many times you explain it.

UX gets redefined all the time. Every time a big new iOS or Android or Windows version gets rolled out, UX designers

have to rethink the way products will function in these new environments, sometimes drastically. You have to think on your feet a lot to be a UX designer, in other words.

As described in great detail in [Interaction Design Best Practices](#), you need to constantly be ready to leave behind what you know for an uncertain destination.



Bottom line: If you are good with people, love messy problems with multiple solutions, and want to be on the bleeding edge of an emerging field – then UX is for you.

2. Launching a UX Career

So, you've learned some core UX methods and now you want to launch a UX career. Maybe you've even done an internship or two and joined some professional UX organizations. *Maybe* you've even had a nibble or two from some hiring organizations about full-time work.

Below are three tactics I recommend for taking that next leap into full-time UX work.

Tactic 1: Do UX in Your Current Organization

Pretty much every organization that has a public-facing website needs UX. They may not know they need it, but they do.

And if you've learned something about UX, your first stop on your journey into full-fledged "UXhood" might be your current manager. You've been doing something for a living thus far, right? Why not ask if there's some way you can transition into getting your feet wet with UX within your own organization?



This is especially possible if the following things are true:

- You work in a large organization with lots of different departments that don't communicate with each other much.
- You work in an organization that depends heavily on a public-facing website, mobile application, or even an enterprise software application that every employee has to navigate on a daily basis.
- Your organization has at least heard of UX and generally thinks it's a good idea.

As with any approach to launching a new career, there are risks involved with this approach. Some of these risks are substantial, and should be avoided at all costs. Here are some I've personally experienced:

Risk:

Your employer says, "Great, why don't you just start doing that as extra work on top of your current full-time job with no resources and report back to me about it. Thanks!"

Response:

Your answer to this should be a polite, but firm, "no."

Risk:

Your employer doesn't really have any idea what UX is, but thinks it's the solution to all their problems: "Great, why don't you just redesign our website/mobile app for us from the ground up and let us know when that gets done. Thanks!"

Response:

Your answer to this should be a polite, but firm: "I am not a web developer, but I can work with a developer on this" (unless, of course, you are a developer; then it's up to you if you want to take this risk).

Risk:

Your employer says, “Great, you’ll be working under so-and-so who has convinced me they know everything about UX even though they clearly have no experience in it what-so-ever. Thanks!”

Response:

Your answer to this should be a polite, but firm, “I’d definitely be open to collaborating with so-and-so, but I really need some creative control over this project.”

Tactic 2: Seek a UX Role in a New Organization

Sometimes, for various reasons, it’s best for you to cut those apron strings and apply to jobs in new organizations. In order to do so, you need two things:

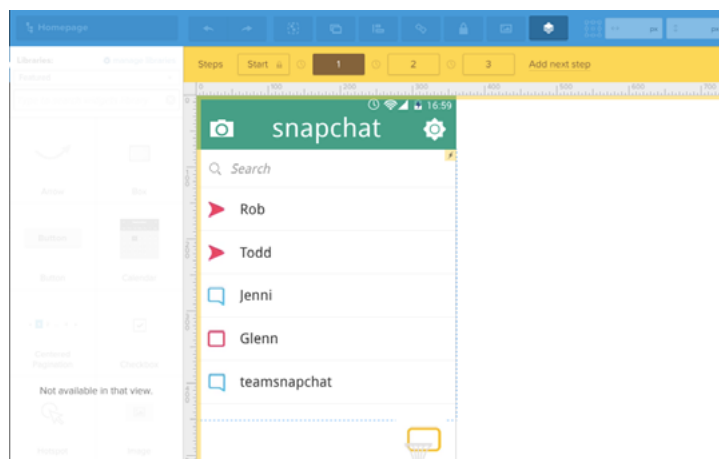
- A portfolio of your work, even if it’s based on largely hypothetical design situations.
- The time and energy to perform “design tests,” which are the main screening mechanism for companies hiring in UX.

Essentially, your portfolio must be an easily portable, but private, collection of projects that demonstrate your problem-solving. It’s much better to explain 3 projects in-depth

(illustrating your thought process and the design iterations) than to just create a Dribbbalized visual gallery of every project you've touched.

You'll also need to prepare for timed tests in which you are given a problem and must solve it to the hiring manager's satisfaction.

To train myself, I would seek out a design problem (such as reworking the checkout process for a high-profile site like Overstock or Ebay), then dive into a rapid prototyping tool like UXPin to create some low-fidelity prototypes of the new flow. I'd give myself a time limit like 20 minutes, then explain out loud the thinking behind the prototype. If you have any friends who work in UX, try having them play the role of hiring manager and ask for feedback afterwards.



Animated Prototypes in UXPin. Get started with a free trial.

UX jobs typically come in a combination of the following varieties:

- **Contract jobs:** These are typically short-term jobs that last for a defined period of time, such as six months. They are not to be taken lightly because they may be a great way to gain UX work experience, even if they're only part-time.
- **Permanent jobs:** These are typically long-term jobs. They typically come with added benefits not available in contract jobs like good quality health insurance, job security, and even some possible management work (e.g. leading teams, managing projects, managing entire products, etc). These are also much harder to land than contract jobs.
- **Agency jobs:** These are jobs with smaller organizations that are typically devoted explicitly to design, such as web design firms, digital marketing agencies, and startups built around applications. These jobs tend to be lower paid than their corporate counterparts, but are a great way to build your reputation, because your job is primarily design-oriented.
- **Corporate jobs:** These jobs are with large-scale organizations typically devoted to a product or service that doesn't explicitly have to do with design. These jobs typically pay

well, but can also be incredibly stressful and often involve working with an organization with a lot of moving parts. It might be intimidating to many people first starting out.

You should definitely consider looking for work in a new organization if:

- You attempted to move toward doing UX within your current organization and were shut down for whatever reason and still have a burning desire to do UX full-time.
- You can relocate to a technology hub where there are lots of UX-related jobs (if you are not currently in one).
- You feel trained up enough in UX that you're ready for the challenge of full-time work.

Some of the risks with launching a UX career in a new organization include:

- **The uncertainty of a new organizational culture.** With UX positions (which range from working with tech-facing information to working in the field with users) you need to ask questions about specific job duties to make sure you're well suited.

- **The unicorn effect.** An oft-debated piece of UX culture, “de-sign unicorns” are folks that have incredibly rare combinations of skill sets, like someone who is equally good at visual design, code, and user research. The problem with this mentality, however, is that these jobs might demand one major skill set completely unrelated to UX.

Beware jobs that look like developer jobs, but contain just a few UX skill sets. And again, ask plenty of questions. Most importantly, be honest with your skillset.

Tactic 3: Launch Your Own Design Firm or Consultancy

Even though this might be the Holy Grail of many young entrepreneurs, going solo is probably the least viable option for beginners.

First of all, you need clients. And clients are hard to find. You’re competing against more established businesses for a finite client base. Clients also have to be people that trust you and your expertise enough to significantly invest in you and your service.

Great businesses are built on
great experiences. We make
those experiences happen.



Photo credit: [Adaptive Path](#)

Second of all, you need a reputation. In the design world, reputations are built from working with organizations, so you see the Catch-22 here. If you're just starting out, and don't have a lot of formal work experience in UX, it can be incredibly difficult to establish the kind of reputation you need to attract clients. The only real way to do so is to do freelance work.

Starting your own agency or consultancy might be viable if you meet any of the following criteria:

- You find yourself in a network of fellow professionals looking to do work sharing, (e.g. you do work for them and they do work for you – sharing clients who need UX and another skill set, etc.).

- You find yourself working within your current organization with highly motivated and skilled individuals trying to create separate opportunities on the side (this was the case with myself).
- You find yourself in a network of people who have needs for UX-related services but don't want to hire for a full-time UX position.
- Someone offers to hire you as a consultant. It can be very beneficial for you, and for them, if you create a sole proprietorship, LLC, or S-Corps so that you are not simply functioning as an at-will employee. Many of these business structures can also limit your tax liability, and your personal liability, should something go awry.

Some of the risks of launching your own UX organization include:

- **Lack of guaranteed income.** Even contract jobs come with a set wage, some benefits, and some certainty of a paycheck from week to week. Starting your own organization comes with no guarantees. There *are* people who start their own organization and make a million dollars their first year, but

there are also people who win the lottery. Starting your own organization doesn't mean it will be profitable.

- **Lack of guaranteed growth.** Typically, startups face real obstacles when trying to land those first few big clients or customer bases. Then, if they manage to get on their feet, growth can be uncertain. You might find your startup grows very quickly for a month and then stagnates. Local markets are also often notoriously unpredictable, meaning that you might land several big clients and then have them leave for another, more established firm.
- **Lack of access to benefits, including health insurance.** Many entrepreneurs find themselves sacrificing a lot of their personal needs to feed their startup, which can include important things like good health benefits. It pays to work for organizations, especially if they are willing to provide benefits to you at little or no cost.

3. Get out there and reinvent yourself (into a UX person)!

Whether you decide to work part-time, full-time, or by launching your own firm, UX is an exciting field with a lot of possibility, and it is only going to expand.

People from all kinds of industries are suddenly realizing that they need someone in their organization who can craft experiences for different users, create inexpensive prototypes, and solve messy human problems. UX is not going away anytime soon and all indicators are that it is only going to grow in importance as companies, non-profits, and educational institutions invest increasing amounts of money into developing digital products.



Photo credit: ["UX for Good Breakout. WIAD DC. Creative Commons.](#)

As with most careers that are currently in-demand, the only thing stopping you from becoming a UX professional is your own ingenuity. If you have the fire for helping to build the next generation of digital products, then go out there and land yourself a position you can be excited to go to every day.

Practice wireframing & prototyping in UXPin

Everything you ever wanted in a **UX Design Platform**

- ✓ Complete prototyping framework for web and mobile
- ✓ Collaboration and feedback for any team size
- ✓ Lo-fi to hi-fi design in a single tool
- ✓ Integration with Photoshop and Sketch

[START FOR FREE](#)